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NODIS -- LOR

For the Ambassador from the President.

1. First let me thank you for your 2092 and related messages. It is an exceedingly helpful and thoughtful analysis of the situation, and it gives me the clearest understanding I have had of the situation as you see it and of the reasoning behind your recommendations. We have discussed the matter at length here, and we have a large measure of agreement with your analysis.

2. We agree with your implicit assessment that strength and clarity of U. S. commitment and determination are of major importance in political and even military balances in SVN.

3. We are inclined to adopt a policy of prompt and clear reprisal, together with a readiness to start joint planning and execution on future military operations both within South Vietnam and against the North, but without present commitment as to the timing and scale of Phase II

4. We are convinced that it is better to remove dependents before reprisals begin, and we believe that by adoption and public indication of

Transmitted with White House 1/7/65 — The Secretary — DE - William P. Bundy — DOD - Secretary McNamara — JCS/J-3 — Gen. Wheeler — CIA - Mr. William Bundy

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reprisal policy we can provide the necessary demonstration that this act represents firmness, not weakness.

5. In the light of these conclusions, we propose for your consideration and comment the following course of action in the coming weeks. Specific timing would depend on timing and character of political truce now in sight.

(1) Public indication in Saigon of US/GVN decision to adopt a policy of prompt and fitting reply to Viet Cong atrocities, whether against Vietnamese or Americans. We would prefer that this indication be given by inconspicuous background briefings rather than formal public statement, but request your judgment whether necessary indication of firmness to cover dependent withdrawal can be achieved in this way.

(2) After firmness of reprisal policy is clear, but before reprisals, prompt and orderly evacuation of all U. S. dependents.

(3) Establishment of joint planning for execution of reprisal policy. Subject to your comment, we suggest following guidelines for such planning:

(a) Reprisal planning should include provision for action by forces of both U. S. and GVN.

(b) Targets should be in southern section of DRV.

(c) Reprisal plans should be subject to review and approval, before any given execution, by two chief executives.

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(d) Reprisal planning should be based on premise that reply should be made within 24 hours unless circumstances of atrocity sharply modify normal presumption of VC guilt.

(4) At the same time that reprisal planning is initiated, we should press for closer cooperation in planning and execution of major military actions in SVN. Binh Gia action raises question whether we should not have arrangements which could prevent classical error of piecemeal commitment described in your weekly report. More affirmatively, we are sure that a few solid military victories achieved by use of U. S. military command judgment and energy would be worth all the rest of this program put together.

(5) We would inform top GVN leadership of our readiness to begin joint contingency planning for Phase II actions, but would make it very clear that decisions in this area would depend:

(a) on experience in reprisal actions

(b) on joint efforts to achieve victories within South Vietnam,

and (c) on joint efforts to achieve political stability.

My decisions on Phase II will necessarily be affected by performance in earlier activities.

6. This program omits discussion of the enormous problem of political unity you will face even if truce is achieved. I have read your 2057 with great interest,

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and I am considering whether to send someone for further discussions with you on this subject. This issue is connected in my mind with the related question whether our rules of assignment and rotation in all departments are bringing the best and most experienced Americans to Vietnam. I am asking State, Defense, CIA and AID to review this question in the light of prospective withdrawal of dependents and we will communicate further soon.

GP-1.

End.

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